

ORNITHOLOGICAL LITERATURE

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF ALEXANDER WILSON. By Clark Hunter (ed.). American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1983:456 pp., 21 figs., 3 maps, 4 color plates. \$40.00.—The last major biographical work on Alexander Wilson, by Robert Cantwell, appeared nearly a quarter of a century ago and is still considered the definitive Wilson biography. The present work is not intended to supersede Cantwell's effort, but rather to be vehicle for bringing forth about 40 of Wilson's unpublished letters and gathering in one place over 100 additional letters previously published in scattered sources over the last 160 years. Many of the latter had been altered by contemporary editors squeamish about naming names, and they appear unadulterated here for the first time. Hunter's life of Wilson occupies about 100 pages of the volume and is offered, as the author avows, as an explanatory companion for the real stuff of this work, Wilson's own letters. Included in the four appendices are Wilson's United States naturalization certificate, his last will and testament, and the court records from a political scandal that Wilson brought upon himself in his native Paisley, Scotland, prior to his departure for America.

Clark Hunter, himself a Scotsman, confesses to being a bibliophile rather than an ornithologist. The book is a scholarly work, however, and a relatively modest production, although the somewhat steep price is partly a reflection of the book's high quality paper and antique type face. The annotations of the letters might appear to leave something to be desired in their quantity, but this I believe to be due not to any lack of zeal on the editor's part, but rather to the difficulty in securing accurate information. It is nearly 200 years since some of these letters were written, and time and the overprotectiveness of Wilson's earliest biographers have done much to conceal facts from the modern editor. Hunter has done admirably in the face of these obstacles. In general the letters require little comment; such passages as this one, in a letter to William Bartram in 1804, speak volumes about the milieu in which Wilson worked: "I have been drawing Woodpeckers this sometime. Pray be so good as inform me if there is not 4 different species besides the Flicker in these parts . . . I suppose that none of the large red Crested Ones can be found within 20 miles of Philada I would not begrudge 2 days sacrificed in getting possession of One." An ornithological editor might, however, remark on the following passage from the same letter: "I lately discovered a new and most extraordinary Blackheaded Woodpecker on the trunk of a large tree in your [eastern Pennsylvania] woods of a perfect nondescript species. The largest of my Hawks was a mere Tom Tit to it . . . [W]ith what Genus to class it I am totally ignorant. One thing I am positive of, that it was a *Woodpecker*, a *black-headed* one and a very expert one too." The identity of such an extraordinary beast is a mystery.

I did object to the absence of a means of readily determining which were the previously unpublished letters, and would have liked to know the source of a quotation from Daniel Defoe on page 19 and the identity of "a bird previously undescribed by naturalists," mentioned on page 77. The reference on page 90 to Charles Willson Peale as the founder of America's first natural history museum would be more meaningful if it were also noted that that museum was the Philadelphia Academy. Such criticisms aside, this book is an important one for scholars interested in Alexander Wilson's life in particular and for anyone interested in the history of American ornithology in general.—MARY C. MCKITRICK.

THE FEEDING SYSTEM OF THE PIGEON (*Columba livia* L.). By Gart (A.) Zweers. Advances in Anatomy, Embryology, and Cell Biology, Vol. 73. Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Heidelberg,